

Five Concepts for Enhanced Communication from the Podium

Shanti Simon Nolan, DMA
Flight Commander & Associate Conductor,
The United States Air Force Band, Washington, D.C.
Associate Director of Bands, Shenandoah Conservatory

&

Eric M. Allen, DMA
Assistant Director of Bands, Texas Tech University

Introduction

As conductors, we are charged with the responsibility of communicating a myriad of information to our ensembles. At times our instincts compel us toward conducting gestures that “feel right” but elicit undesired responses. If you have experienced this on the podium, fear not! You are not alone. Most of our instincts come honestly, through our experience as ensemble players. Let’s work through these tendencies as we address five concepts that are common conducting challenges and propose rationale, and solutions for meaningful communication from the podium.

1. What is the “RIGHT” conducting position?

The “right” conducting position is unique to the individual, but there are some traits that apply to everyone. The “right” conducting position is natural, gives the musicians support to play or sing their best, and elicits the best sounds from the ensemble.

A conducting position that feels right does not necessarily translate to a position that elicits the desired response from the ensemble. Find the position that helps the musicians create the best sounds. The appropriate position is one that appears natural, authentic and simple. It is best to approach this position with body weight evenly distributed and standing tall. Create space around the torso by extending the arms

forward and positioning the elbows slightly away from the body, while avoiding unnecessary angles at hinge points. Finding the appropriate position for the beat plane is relative to individual stature, however the beat plane in the proximity of your heart creates a natural position that connects your arms to your core, and inevitably your breath.

Activities for the development of this skill:

1. Find the “right” conducting position.

Every ensemble knows when a conductor is in the “right” conducting position. To find this position, ask them to help. Start with your hands hanging comfortably by your side. With baton in hand, slowly raise your arms until the ensemble responds affirmatively. This “right” position for many will not feel comfortable initially. Remember, what feels right is not always what communicates accurately. For some, this “right” position will feel too high or the elbows may feel more extended than normal.

2. Videotape your rehearsals.

If this position is different from your normal set up, it will take practice to create muscle memory. Record and analyze your conducting position regularly while making this change. This will help you transition to a more communicative conducting position.

2. Why does the ensemble play behind MY beat?

It is not uncommon for conductors to experience frustration with the delay of sound that occurs while conducting. Some spend precious rehearsal time in an attempt to “train” their groups to play with their ictus, but an effort to do so places clear limitations on music making. The desire to have sound occur with our gesture stems from our experience as ensemble members. We perceive sound occurring immediately when we play or sing, therefore we expect that same response on the podium. This perception is perpetuated when conductors practice conducting to audio recordings. It is comforting to have sound occur with us, but this concept is merely a reaction to that

which has already occurred. An ensemble that sounds with your gesture is comparable to having someone give you “the answer” before you ask “the question.” How can someone possibly know what you are about to ask, unless you have trained him/her to know that the question will always be the same? It is possible that this “training” could produce an accurate performance, but calls to question the art of real-time music making.

Artistic ensembles sound after the ictus because they are reacting to the gesture given. Significant information is conveyed in the preparation, ictus and rebound that players must process in order to respond appropriately. The delay is rarely even perceived by the ensemble players. They simply respond to the gesture given. Remember that “when to play” is only one part of the information given. It is the “how to play” that they need to respond effectively.

There are times when it is appropriate to conduct with the ensemble as if simply monitoring the music. The concept of conducting ahead of the ensemble, or forecasting information, primarily applies to initiating sound; indicating a change in style, dynamic, or mood; or navigating transitions. The ability to know when to be a proactive leader and when to relinquish control on the podium is essential to creating meaningful music. Trust your ensemble to be responsive musicians and make every experience natural and new!

Activities for the development of this skill:

1. Be less clear.

During your ensemble warm-up, try giving your ensemble clear preparatory gesture but instead of giving a downbeat with a clear ictus, break the conducting plane and drop your arms to your side. Encourage them to listen to each other to determine when to initiate sound. Make sure the speed of your preparatory beat is consistent. Try this at different tempi and dynamic levels. You should notice that as they focus less on playing with your ictus and focus more on listening, they sound more together.

2. Practice conducting your family & friends!

At home, ask your family and friends to say “ta” on the beat while you conduct. Standing as far from them as possible, ask them to react to the dynamic, style and tempo that you indicate. This should provide a relatively accurate perception of the delay that occurs while conducting. Ensure they take the tempo you intend. If they slow down, you may need to be more proactive with tempo.

3. Resist the urge to conduct recordings!

It is difficult to listen to recordings of powerful music and not be drawn to conduct along. During this developmental period it is essential to resist this urge. Listen intently, then turn off the recording, pull out the score and practice while imagining the sound occurring in reaction to your gesture.

3. How do I encourage *accelerando*/*stringendo*?

Indicating tempo changes through gesture requires a great deal of preparation from the conductor. A solid sense of consistent tempo and acute awareness of minor fluctuations is important to effectively lead an ensemble. Like many other concepts in our gestural vocabulary, indicating tempi changes such as *accelerando* or *stringendo* requires counterintuitive thinking.

Our instincts inform us that moving faster requires more energy, strength and movement. Running fast, throwing a fastball, and even playing fast technical passages on our instruments require these. Indicating an increase of speed through conducting gesture, however, requires the opposite. Large intense motion indicates to players to stretch musical lines, increase weight and inevitably slow down. Ensembles react to the increased travel motion between beats and perceive that the line should increase in duration. Achieving *accelerando* or *stringendo* requires the conductor to decrease travel motion between beats, thus conducting with a smaller and less active beat pattern. Simplifying motion allows players the freedom to move forward. Ensembles are also propelled forward

by the speed of the ictus rebound. Light quick rebounds encourage ensembles to move forward naturally.

Activities for the development of this skill:

1. Practice tempo changes regularly with your ensemble.

During your ensemble warm-up, have your ensemble play a series of 8th notes on a repeated unison pitch. Practice encouraging *accelerando* through quick ictus rebounds and smaller patterns with less motion. Encourage them to take the information from you but to listen to the players around them to ensure they move together. Allow yourself to move ahead of them and don't wait for sound! They will follow you. Continue this exercise at varying rates of *accelerando* and *stringendo*.

4. How do I encourage optimal sound quality during quiet musical moments?

Quiet musical moments demand support from the podium. To encourage musicians to play or sing softer, we tend to close ourselves off, become smaller, and move away from the ensemble. This stems from our experience as players. To achieve this dynamic as a player sometimes requires this type of approach. These natural tendencies, while they do encourage softer playing, also discourage important factors such as breath support, open sounds, and good pitch.

The most intimate musical moments require the conductor to stand tall, elevate the torso, keep the elbows away from the body, and in all ways support the sound. Intimacy can be created by positioning the hands closer together or elevating the plane. The torso, the evidence of breath, must remain open and elevated. Musicians benefit from support encouraged by the conductor to maintain good tone and accurate pitch. Modeling this for the ensemble helps them maintain the appropriate support for intimate dynamics.

Activities for the development of this skill:

1. Practice physically supporting the sound in quiet musical moments.

Have the ensemble play a sustained *pianissimo* chord or pitch. Try this exercise with a closed-off torso, elbows close to the body, and palms facing the ensemble as if to say "stop" or "less." Next, have them play the same chord or pitch but this time, stand tall and grounded, elevate the torso, extend the elbows, and put the hands in an inviting position (perhaps palms up) close together on a slightly elevated plane. You will hear the difference!

5. How does the ensemble respond to the breath of the conductor?

The type of breath ingested and exhaled communicates a myriad of information. It gives life to the music. Most conductors understand the importance of the preparatory or empathetic breath, but we must also recognize that the quality of the breath communicates much more than tempo or when to enter. The presence of breath is one of the defining characteristics of human life. Therefore, music as an extension of human expression must also possess this characteristic. The way we breathe indicates energy, mood, style and even tempo. The breath is the motivation for gesture as the arms become an extension of all that enters and exits through the breath. In expressive conducting, every movement originates from the way we ingest the musical phrase through breath and exhale its intent to the ensemble. This is not only true for wind players, but for all musicians.¹

One of the most important things to remember about the breath is that the players must sense that the conductor is constantly breathing. This may sound elementary, but the simple act of breathing through the mouth with lips slightly open can greatly affect the sound of an ensemble. When musicians sense air moving through the conductor, the connection becomes more intimate and communicative.

Utilizing the breath as the core of expressive communication may be the key to deeper and more meaningful ensemble musical experiences. The

¹ James Jordan, Mark Moliterno and Nova Thomas, *The Musician's Breath: The Role of Breathing in Human Expression*, (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2011).

development of this skill requires vulnerability. You can sometimes “fake it” with your arms, but you can’t “fake it” with your breath.

Activities for the development of this skill:

1. Keep your mouth open.

Stand in front of a mirror, think of a piece of music, put the metronome on, and practice keeping your mouth open while going through the piece. Use the mirror to determine a natural position of the mouth with the lips slightly parted.

2. Practice breathing in the style of the music.

During score study, it is helpful to imagine the sounds you want to hear including all the phrasing and nuance while BREATHING the music. Do not move your arms during this exercise. What type of breath do you feel fits the character of the music? Breathe the phrase. Inhale and exhale in the style of the music. You will be amazed how this experience affects your gesture. Because you are not conducting during this exercise, you can practice this technique with a recording.

Conclusion

In his book, *The Conductor's Gesture*, James Jordan mentions that during his many conducting workshops he often had the desire to speak on lofty musical ideas, but found it necessary to instead address basic conducting fundamentals. “A ‘return to basics’ has always yielded incredible results.”² As you continue your journey through this amazing profession, know that there is no shame in returning to the basic fundamentals of conducting. It is through basic concepts that we more effectively influence musical ideas and lead others toward incredible musical experiences!

² James Jordan, Giselle Wyers and Meade Andrews, *The Conductor's Gesture: A Practical Application of Rudolf von Laban's Movement Language*, (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2011), 12.